

Public Hearing on
H.B. No. 5037 (COMM) – AN ACT ADJUSTING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM
ENDING JUNE 30, 2023
Appropriations Committee
February 24, 2022

Good afternoon Senator Osten, Senator Miner, Representative Walker and Representative France, and members of the Appropriations Committee.

My name is Collette Bement and I am the mother of 35-year-old young man, Scott, who has intellectual and developmental disabilities. Scott lives in Willimantic with two housemates. He receives funding through DDS for employment supports provided by Opportunity Works Connecticut (OWC) from Rockville and residential support provided by Horizons from South Windham.

At OWC, the last 2 years with Covid have been really difficult. When Covid shut down OWC, they were forced to move to a Zoom format for all their individuals. It worked well for some, but not everyone. When OWC began to reopen, they did it in stages because many individuals were not ready to come back and they found it very difficult to socially distance and wear masks. But when OWC was finally ready to reopen more fully, they did not have enough staff available to welcome all of their individuals back. In some cases, it was because the staff were older and they decided to retire rather than go back to OWC because of Covid fears. But in most cases it was because the staff had found other jobs that paid much more and with less stress! Without enough staff available to open safely, many individuals were forced to stay home and wait. OWC has tried everything to hire more staff – they held job fairs, but no one came. They offered finders fees and signing bonuses, but nothing has helped! OWC cannot find reliable, capable staff! The lack of enough qualified staff means IDD individuals are stuck at home!

With Horizon's residential support, Scott and his two housemates were extremely lucky to have an awesome house manager, Steve, who managed their home for more than 5 years. He resigned recently as their house manager to return to college. But while Steve had been a constant in their lives, there has been at least a 75% turnover in their daily support staff every year. Horizons has always been able to hire competent staff, but not with the staffing crisis that is going on now. Horizons is having a very difficult time in recruiting residential support staff. The current house manager at Scott's home is actually an Associate Director of Supported Living at Horizons. When OWC had to close for Covid-related reasons for 2 weeks before Christmas and Scott had to stay home, another of Horizon's Associate Directors of Supported Living stayed with him at his home. And one day the Director of Supported Living was at the house with Scott when we picked him up. Having top management personnel providing direct care support is not a viable solution for anyone!

The lack of direct support staff is a crisis for the private provider agencies. The community nonprofits have always had high turnover and trouble hiring because of low wages, but this crisis is worse than anything agencies have faced before. It is truly unconscionable that in a time of unprecedented budget surpluses in the state of Connecticut, the Governor's budget does not include the necessary funding for these safety net providers and their employees. These direct support staff deserve higher wages, health care and benefits for the work that they do - they are **essential**! Please show them that you respect the work that they do and increase the funding for the non-profit provider agencies!

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